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ABSTRACT

The Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) is a national program that supports the efforts of community colleges in distressed rural areas to move their people and communities toward prosperity. RCCI's goals are increasing access to education and developing regional economies. RCCI demonstration sites have produced a wealth of information about community change. The community engagement process used by RCCI is based on four basic principles: 1) to achieve significant reform, change must occur at five levels--individual, interpersonal, institutional, systemic, and public policy; 2) people-in-relationships, not individual crusaders, are the lifeblood of sustainable change; 3) communities, institutions, and their citizens are best defined not by their deficiencies and shortcomings, but by their assets, strengths, and creative imagination; and 4) change is a verb, not a noun, and it cannot be delivered overnight. The RCCI change process is premised on the development of leadership teams consisting of the college president, administrators, and faculty as well as representatives of local business, government, public schools, and community organizations. Leadership teams set goals, develop strategies, identify partners, implement a plan, and evaluate that plan. It's not impossible to tackle development problems with only technical solutions, but the long-term viability of communities rests on the ability of its leaders to learn, adapt, and behave differently. Leadership development is at the core of community change. When leadership teams work collectively, sharing power and resources, a stronger foundation of community-based change is established. The skills needed for leading change at the inner, interpersonal, organizational, community, and systemic/policy levels of leadership development are discussed. (TD)

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# Leadership for Change:

# Working for Community Change

# in Rural America

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## Notes

This guidebook is a companion to the video documentary, *RCCI: Leadership for Change*. The documentary was created by Video Dialog Inc., a partner in the RCCI. This guidebook and the video are part of a documentary package, *RCCI: Planting the Seeds of Change*, chronicling the experiences of two communities as they undertook comprehensive community development efforts during the RCCI's demonstration phase.

***About the Rural Community College Initiative***

The Rural Community College Initiative is a national program that helps community colleges in economically distressed regions move their people and communities toward prosperity. It supports aggressive and creative efforts to increase jobs, income, and access to education in rural communities.

The RCCI aims to strengthen rural community colleges, enhancing their capacity to provide economic leadership for their regions and serve as agents for community development. The Initiative is helping reduce the isolation of rural colleges by building a national network of diverse colleges with common challenges. It is also working to increase state and national support for rural community colleges.

The RCCI's demonstration phase from 1994 through 2001 was a partnership among the 24 participating community colleges, MDC, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), and The Ford Foundation, which continues to fund the Initiative. The demonstration was managed by MDC. Video Dialog Inc. provided video documentation and related media services. This report and its companion video are a product of the demonstration phase. Beginning in 2002, RCCI entered a new phase directed by the Southern Rural Development Center and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development.

***MDC Inc.***

MDC's mission is to advance the South through strategies that expand opportunity, reduce poverty, and build inclusive communities. We analyze trends to identify challenges that impede progress for the South and its people, and we address those challenges from multiple angles. Our core strategies include developing responsive public policies; demonstrating effective programs; building institutional and community capacity for progress; and informing the public dialogue.

Established in 1967 to help North Carolina make the transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy and from a segregated to an integrated workforce, MDC has spent the last 35 years publishing research and developing policies and programs to strengthen the workforce, foster economic development, and remove the barriers between people and jobs. MDC now works to facilitate the South's transition from an industrial to a knowledge economy and from a biracial to a multicultural society. MDC is a private nonprofit supported with grants and contracts from foundations; federal, state, and local governments; and the private sector.

For more information about the RCCI or this resource, please contact MDC.

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# Introduction

The **Rural Community College Initiative** (RCCI) is a national program that supports community colleges in distressed rural areas in moving their people and communities toward prosperity. The RCCI's twin goals are increasing access to education and developing regional economies – both equipping people for careers and increasing the region's capacity to provide those careers. These goals are achieved through a team-based, long-term strategic planning and implementation process; leadership development; skills development; peer learning and networking; and exposure to innovative and effective strategies for educational access and economic development.

RCCI's demonstration phase began in 1994, when The Ford Foundation invited nine community and tribal colleges to engage in this unique approach to community development. In 1997, a second round of 15 colleges joined RCCI. The demonstration represented a partnership among the 24 participating community colleges, the Ford Foundation, the American Association of Community Colleges, and MDC Inc., a nonprofit organization that conducts research and manages demonstration projects in economic and workforce development. The demonstration phase continued through 2001.

From 1997 to 2000, Video Dialog Inc. documented the experiences of two RCCI sites – Sitting Bull College in Fort Yates, North Dakota, and Meridian Community College in Meridian, Mississippi. The resulting video documentary package, *RCCI: Planting the Seeds of Change*, includes two videos and two companion guidebooks.

- *RCCI: Planting the Seeds of Change – Real Communities and Their Experiences Beginning a Change Effort* describes the principles that undergird the Rural Community College Initiative and the resulting collaborative community change efforts at Sitting Bull and Meridian (video and guidebook).
- *Leadership for Change* documents the experiences of local leaders in the two communities and describes the skills needed to bring about change. (video and guidebook).

The goal of this documentation is to provide those considering a community development initiative with a better understanding of the complex nature of leadership for community change and the personal commitment it requires.

# The RCCI: An Overview

The Rural Community College Initiative focuses on rural communities that continue to struggle with economic uncertainty, even in a time of national prosperity. Some of these communities have lost their historic job base of mining, farming, timber, or low-wage manufacturing. Some are Indian reservations that have been unable to develop viable economic systems. Still others find themselves in the midst of rapid growth that threatens to overwhelm traditional culture and leave behind low-wealth residents.

Education levels are low in most RCCI communities. Many young people drop out of school; others leave home after high school or college in search of better jobs. Moreover, many RCCI communities are divided by conflicts between racial or ethnic groups, between rich and poor, and between natives and newcomers. All of these challenges loom large as community leaders consider how they can preserve local traditions while improving economic opportunity to create a better quality of life for all residents.

### *Linking Education and Economic Development: A Unique Approach*

Standard approaches to economic development have started with government or chambers of commerce setting goals for economic growth and taking steps to bring new businesses to rural communities. But RCCI is unique and nontraditional in its approach. RCCI makes the important link between the need for economic development and the gaps in the education of local residents – a critical issue for poor, rural regions. Recognizing the inextricable relationship between economic opportunity and education, The Ford Foundation challenged community colleges in rural areas to serve as catalysts and leaders of community change.

Community colleges have the potential to address both sides of the economic opportunity equation – they can help create jobs by supporting businesses and entrepreneurs, and they can prepare people at various stages of life and readiness to fill those jobs. The Rural Community College Initiative focuses on this unique nexus as the starting point for building college/community partnerships to promote economic prosperity in rural areas.

As a rural economic development experiment, RCCI's special contribution to the field has been an increased understanding of the roles colleges can play in fostering stronger, more viable communities. For example, rural community colleges can actively and aggressively extend access to educational opportunity by:

- developing strategic partnerships with K-12 schools and improving education at all levels;
- improving developmental studies and academic support services that address the needs of disadvantaged rural populations, including counseling, tutoring, mentoring, and financial aid;
- creating a college environment that is family-friendly and culturally supportive, including child care and transportation programs, flexible scheduling, and an approach to academics and other aspects of college-going that honors and respects the students' cultural backgrounds;
- designing nontraditional programs that reach and meet the needs of hard-to-serve populations, including high school dropouts, welfare mothers, and older or dislocated workers; and
- creating distance learning opportunities for residents of remote rural areas.

They can build a foundation for economic development by:

- initiating and strengthening entrepreneurship, small business development, and business support programs;
- promoting a regional approach to economic development, including convening local leaders to discuss and share solutions to common challenges and serving as a clearinghouse for ideas, resources, and contacts; and
- providing workforce training, including high-tech training, to meet employers' needs.

As they developed and fine-tuned specific strategies to fulfill these roles, RCCI demonstration sites produced a wealth of information about the ways in which college-led partnerships and programs can work, the challenges partnerships can present, and the outcomes such programs can generate.

Their experiences also offer insights about community change – and leadership for community change – that go beyond community colleges. The RCCI process encourages indigenous solutions to local problems, fosters a safe space for residents to begin a dialogue to overcome long-standing divisions and misconceptions, and offers community leaders access to model programs and technical assistance providers. Through their participation in that process, RCCI teams have generated lessons and knowledge that could help inform any community change effort in rural America.

This guide describes the RCCI process of community change, the roles local leaders play in the process, and the skills and competencies local leaders need to bring about community change. While each RCCI site and its people are unique, the local leaders in Meridian and Sitting Bull share many similar challenges and opportunities, and they illustrate lessons about community change learned throughout the RCCI.

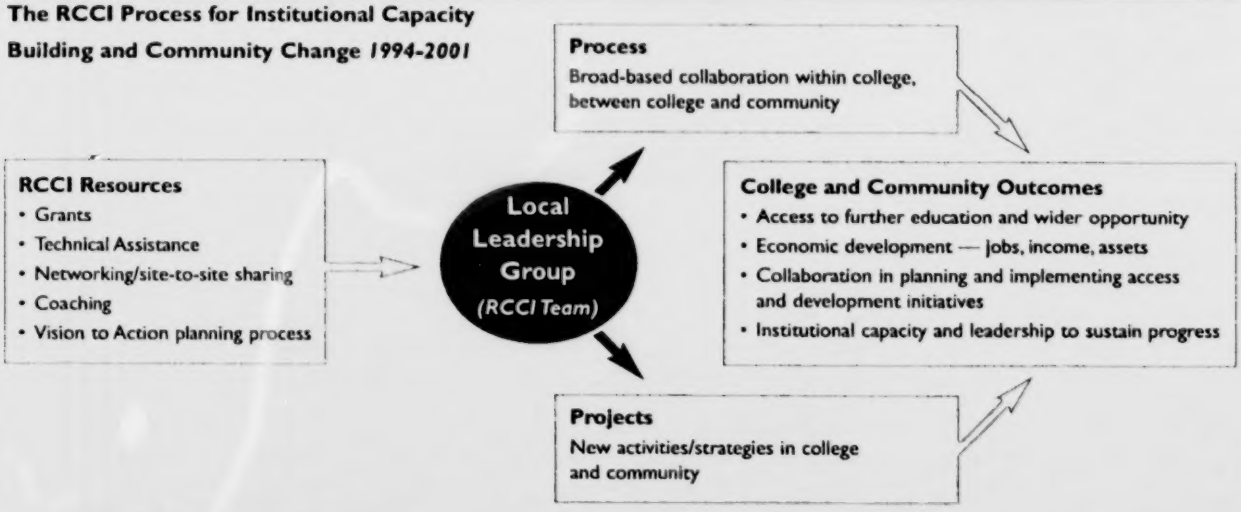
### *The RCCI Model for Institutional Capacity Building and Community Change*

The community engagement process used by RCCI demonstration sites is based on an approach that MDC has developed and refined over years of working with a broad range of communities and institutions. Some basic principles – gleaned from previous field experience and years of study – inform this approach:

- When the goal is significant reform, change must occur at five levels: individual, interpersonal, institutional, systemic, and public policy.
- People-in-relationship, not individual crusaders, are the lifeblood of sustainable change.
- Communities, institutions, and their citizens are best defined not by their deficiencies and shortcomings, but by their assets, strengths, and creative imagination.
- Change is a verb, not a noun. It cannot be delivered overnight.[1]

The RCCI change process incorporates these principles into its operating premises. The first operating premise of the RCCI is: Develop teams – and equip them with team skills to make their time and work more effective over the long term. This leadership team is the core of the community's change process. RCCI teams consist of the college president, administrators, and faculty as well as representatives of local business, government, public schools, and community-based organizations. The team may also include students and others who use the services of the college. Designed to provide leadership over the long term, the team is charged with planning RCCI initiatives, overseeing their implementation, and continually scanning the horizon for new opportunities to achieve its vision.

**The RCCI Process for Institutional Capacity Building and Community Change *1994-2001***


Process
Broad-based collaboration within college, between college and community
RCCI Resources
• Grants
• Technical Assistance
• Networking/site-to-site sharing
• Coaching
• Vision to Action planning process
Local Leadership Group (RCCI Team)
College and Community Outcomes
• Access to further education and wider opportunity
• Economic development — jobs, income, assets
• Collaboration in planning and implementing access and development initiatives
• Institutional capacity and leadership to sustain progress
Projects
New activities/strategies in college and community

[1] These principles are adapted from *Building Community by Design*, MDC Inc., 2002.



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### *Moving from Vision to Action: A Summary*

MDC's community change method leads RCCI leadership teams through an extensive process of diagnosis, planning, and implementation called *Moving from Vision to Action*. The process seems to move in a linear fashion – from articulating values to analyzing data, creating a vision, setting goals, developing strategies, identifying partners, implementing a plan, and evaluating that plan. But since communities and their economies are dynamic entities, the RCCI process makes room for teams to go back and forth between steps, sometimes revisiting and revising, but always being intentional about planning and evaluating their work.

**Moving From Vision to Action: *A Summary***

| Step | Purpose | Key Question |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Articulate key values. | To identify the core principles that will underlie the change effort. | What basic assumptions and values should guide what we do? |
| 2. Collect and analyze data. | To understand the current situation. | Where are our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats? Where are we acting in harmony with our values? Where is there dissonance? |
| 3. Describe the current situation. | To prioritize key issues and challenges. | What needs to change? |
| 4. Create a vision. | To identify core values that will characterize the future. | What should be the results of our efforts? |
| 5. Set goals. | To define the ideal future situation. | What specific outcomes do we want to achieve? |
| 6. Research and develop strategies (R&D). | To identify and determine programmatic actions that will produce the desired future. | What approach will we take to reach those outcomes? |
| 7. Analyze stakeholders' influence. | To determine who needs to be involved. | What political/institutional factors should we consider? |
| 8. Plan for action. | To define implementation responsibilities. | Who will do what? When? |
| 9. Plan an evaluation. | To define an approach to measurement and bench-marks to measure progress. | How will we know when we have achieved our goals? |

At a glance, *Moving from Vision to Action* might seem simple. However, each step requires a great deal of effort by a committed team of local leaders. The nature of community problem-solving requires a twin focus on content ("How do we want things to be different in the future? What program strategies will lead us to our vision?") and process ("How should we organize our work? How do we learn to relate to one another so we can come to agreement? How can we sustain our momentum?"). Part of MDC's role in the RCCI was to help people become more enlightened and generative problem solvers on behalf of the institutions and communities that they serve and call home.

It's not impossible to tackle development problems with only technical solutions, but the long-term viability of communities rests on strong civic capacity to tackle each successive challenge it faces – the ability of its leaders to learn, adapt, and behave differently. Building the capacity of local leaders to carry out such work in years to come is fundamental to a community's sustainable development.





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# The Skills Needed for Leading Change

Leadership development is at the core of the work of community change. While the RCCI was not labeled as a "leadership development" program, it was intentionally designed to foster community change by developing leaders' skills at multiple levels.

Ronald Heifetz describes the work of leadership as closing the gap between how things are and how, based on one's values, things ought to be (*Leadership Without Easy Answers*). Shared values motivate the team members to work for change toward a shared vision. The RCCI process is based in part on the values of equity, inclusion, and excellence. It engages participants in extended conversations about "how things are" in their communities and "how things should be." These conversations inevitably lead team members to discuss their own values and principles and to come to a shared understanding of "what must change."

The skills required to close the gap between how things are and how things should be are multidimensional. Local leaders must be competent at five levels to bring about change with savvy and to have staying power over the long run.

**The Five Levels of Leadership Development**

**Innner**

***Oneself***

People must recognize that they are part of the system to be changed. They must be willing to develop greater self-understanding and new skills to lead change more effectively.

**Interpersonal**

***Others with Whom Leadership is Shared***

"People working together" is essential to an effective change process. Leaders must become skilled at building and maintaining new relationships across old fault lines and reaching consensus on complex issues.

**Organizational**

***The Base from Which Leaders Act***

Community change work must be grounded in an organizational home. Local leaders need the skills and knowledge to strengthen and sustain strong local organizations.

**Community**

***The Place Leaders are Concerned with Changing***

Communities are complex entities, and leaders need a range of skills and knowledge to be effective at engaging their community and developing solutions to local challenges.

**Systems/Policy**

***Local, State, and National Systems and Policies***

Some community development efforts require removing barriers in systems or gaining policy support for the community's goals, and local leaders must have the skills to bring about such change.



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At their best, the RCCI teams modeled an inclusive approach to making decisions – an important characteristic of healthy, economically successful communities. Through the RCCI, team members developed stronger communication, decision-making, and personal reflection skills. These skills help people build productive and respectful working relationships with each other – and with others in the community. In addition, a team process addresses many obstacles that can hinder progress in volunteer-led community initiatives, such as personnel turnover, member burnout, unmet goals.

Ultimately, of course, exposure to these skills doesn't guarantee that the team will be effective. Team members must invest the time, energy, and creativity to make the process work. But when team members make these investments and work collectively, sharing power and resources, a stronger foundation for community-based change is established.

### *The Inner Level of Leadership Development*

The master teacher and writer Parker Palmer reminds his readers regularly that effective leadership is a matter of both "being" and "doing." A person's values, motivations, and behavioral traits shape the leader's outlook, sense of what is possible, and ability to inspire and lead others. Any work that intends to help people improve the world around them should therefore help people understand and develop the spirit and potential within them.

There are many ways for participants in a community development leadership program to explore the "inner" dimension of leadership. Silent reflection, diagnostic tools, personal self-assessments, and experiential learning all are ways for exploring the questions: "Who am I as a leader?" "What assets and shortcomings do I bring to the work of leadership?" "What personal work must I do to become better at the community work I feel called to do?"

To function well, leaders need some practical personal skills and knowledge:

- An understanding of the personal values that motivate the leader to do community work: clarity about what Parker Palmer calls "soul" and "role."
- Ability for critical self-assessment: What are my leadership strengths? In what ways do I cast "light" or positive energy on others around me? What are my leadership weaknesses? What is my "shadow" side? How do others see me?
- Ability to build on strengths, overcome or compensate for weaknesses.
- Ability to be intentional (and reflective) about asserting personal power to be a player in the public/civic arena.

### *The Interpersonal Level of Leadership Development*

Forging productive working relationships among people who come to the table from varied perspectives and who are of different ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds or geographical roots requires time, attention, and sensitivity.

Sustainable communities are based on people living and working together in honest, respectful relationships. RCCI was designed to ensure that teams achieved specific, measurable goals. It also aimed to increase institutions' and communities' stock of social capital. Stronger commitments, shared ideas, and relationships can equip communities to confront new challenges in the future.

To function well, members of a leadership group need certain competencies:

- Ability to build and maintain relationships with diverse groups of people.
- Capacity to build and sustain an effective group over time.
- Skills at listening, communicating across differences.
- Ability to run effective meetings that facilitate real dialogue and move a group to consensus.
- Ability to create trust across lines of race, class.
- Ability to analyze weak spots in the team or group and compensate for them.

### *The Organizational Level of Leadership Development*

There are two dimensions of organizational development work needed for strong communities: building the capacity of the organization "sponsoring" the change process, and forging connections among the organizations represented on the leadership team. Inevitably, tricky organizational issues emerge, and organizations and leadership teams often need support in addressing them. Responding to these issues requires not traditional training, but rather coaches or mentors versed in organizational change practices. RCCI provided coaching to teams and connected them with other technical assistance experts in particular organizational issues.

To function well, leaders need some practical organizational skills and knowledge:

- Clarity about the values of their organization and how well those values are aligned with values espoused for the community.
- Ability to analyze and help shape organizational culture.
- Willingness to hold other leaders accountable and to be held accountable to the team's agreed-upon mission and values.
- Knowledge of how to undertake an organizational strategic planning process.
- Understanding of the role of their organization's board and the ability to shape it.
- Basic organizational skills: management systems, record keeping, accounting, using technology; fundraising.

### *The Community Level of Leadership Development*

Communities and community change are complex, and those who engage in change work must be prepared to navigate that complexity. A community change effort has to take into account everything from who holds power in a community and who doesn't to identifying the root causes of the community's challenges and effective ways to overcome them. The dynamic nature of communities and the people who live in them further complicates the task of bringing about change.

To function well, leaders need community-related skills and knowledge:

- Understanding of the "current reality" in the community and a command of the data to support that understanding.
- Knowledge of the political and economic history of the community.
- Understanding of how to plan strategically: develop a vision, goals, strategies, and plans for action based on a community's assets.
- Knowledge of programmatic solutions that can address community needs.
- Skills at building alliances with other groups.
- Ability to identify, develop, and empower other leaders.
- Knowledge of effective use of the media.
- Commitment to celebrating victories (large and small).

### *The Systems/Policy Level of Leadership Development*

The RCCI focused on local community change efforts. Over time, some of the teams began to move into influencing policy around particular issues, to garner long-term support for the strategies they initiated. Since community colleges are public institutions with internal systems and policies and connections to local, state, and federal systems and policies, some teams became involved in particular policy issues affecting community colleges. Additionally, the teams helped inform MDC about needed state and federal policy and system changes that we could address in our role as intermediary to assist the Initiative in reaching its overall goals.

To be effective at the systemic/policy levels, leaders need:

- Basic knowledge of the institutions and agencies that oversee policies – how they work, how money flows.
- Understanding of who holds power in the community and how it is wielded.
- Knowledge of the political and economic history of the community.
- Ability to create collaborative partnerships based on personal, organizational, and community interests.
- Lobbying skills (and related effective use of the media).
- Knowledge of the policy-making process: how legislation is crafted, how budgets are developed.

# Additional Resources

Providing leadership for change and developing local leaders are complex processes; this publication provides just an overview of leadership as experienced in the RCCI. These additional resources can provide more information.

### *On Leadership from MDC*

*Building Community by Design.* Chapel Hill, NC: MDC Inc., September 2002. **www.mdcinc.org**. This publication provides an in-depth review of the competencies leaders need to bring about community change. It includes tools and activities practitioners can use in leadership development and team-building. An extract of the full guide, which is more than 380 pages, is available on MDC's web site along with ordering information for the full guide.

*The Building Blocks of Community Development.* Chapel Hill, NC: MDC Inc., October 2001. **www.mdcinc.org**. This publication provides a greater understanding of the role of leadership and leadership development within a comprehensive approach to community development.

### *On Leadership from Other Sources*

Cashman, Kevin. *Leadership from the Inside Out.* Provo, UT: Executive Excellence, 1999.

Heifetz, Ronald. *Leadership Without Easy Answers.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994.

McCauley, Cynthia, Russ S. Moxley, and Ellen Van Velsor, eds., *Handbook of Leadership Development.* Center for Creative Leadership. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1998.

Palmer, Parker. *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring.* San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990.

Palmer, Parker. *The Courage to Teach.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1998

Palmer, Parker. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening to the Voice of Vocation.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 2000.

*Preparing Collaborative Leaders: A Facilitator's Guide.* Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership, 1984.

### *On the RCCI*

Over the course of the RCCI demonstration, MDC has produced many publications and videos to guide college/community teams in their RCCI work and to share lessons from RCCI with others interested in rural development and rural education. A complete list, with information on ordering and downloading, is available on the RCCI website, **www.mdcinc.org/rcci**. The following RCCI resources may be of particular interest:

*Strategies for Rural Development and Increased Access to Education: A Toolkit for Rural Community Colleges.* Includes 11 videos, a guidebook for *Moving from Vision to Action*, and a notebook of case stories on effective strategies for rural development and education.

*Revitalizing Rural Communities: Lessons from the RCCI.* This paper draws lessons from the RCCI experience that have relevance for other rural community development efforts. It is designed to inspire similar efforts in other rural communities and to inform rural development practitioners, funders, and policymakers.

*Expanding Economic and Educational Opportunity in Distressed Rural Areas: A Conceptual Framework for the Rural Community College Initiative.* This paper, the "bible of RCCI," presents the demonstration's vision and core concepts.

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